

The succulents of Portmeirion pottery

by Colin C. Walker



Fig. 1

Portmeirion Botanic Garden Aloe plate, 18 cm (7 1/4 inch) diameter

Introduction

My interest in the Botanic Garden range of Portmeirion pottery was initially stimulated in 2002 by my New Zealand friends Frances and Ted Verrity. They were avid collectors of the design and they started my own modest collection through a gift of a small Portmeirion plate which features an *Aloe*. I have since added a medium sized plate featuring *Cactus grandiflorus*. Ted documented the story of their Portmeirion collecting activities and their two plates with succulent motifs in the 'New Zealand Cactus & Succulent Journal' (Verrity, 2003).

Last year I was thrilled to inherit a large Portmeirion bowl embellished with many plant motifs including the *Aloe* featured on the small plate. This article tells the story of this pottery, focussing especially on the history of the two succulents that form part of the much wider range of Botanic Garden motifs.

Portmeirion Botanic Garden Pottery

In 1925 the architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis began the creation of the romantic Italianate Portmeirion village in North Wales. His daughter, Susan Williams-Ellis, inherited his love of design and began a career in pottery in the 1950s with her designs intended primarily for the Portmeirion village shop. The business grew and in 1960/1 she and her husband, Euan Cooper-Willis, bought two factories in Stoke-on-Trent where pottery with Susan's designs could be manufactured on a larger scale.

During the 1960s Susan's designs were at the forefront of contemporary style and her coffee sets from that era were already design classics and highly collectable. However, it was not until 1972 that the Botanic Garden range – a wonderful British product with a distinctive pattern – was introduced and is still in production today (Jenkins & McKay, 2000).

The Botanic Garden Succulents

The Botanic Garden range features a wide selection of plant motifs including *Amaryllis reginae* (Mexican Lily), *Arctotis grandiflora* (African Daisy), *Capsicum rubrum* (red peppers), *Clematis florida*, *Cucurbita citrullus* (watermelon), *Dionaea muscipula* (Venus's Fly Trap), *Helleborus niger* (Christmas Rose), *Lonicera periclymenum* (Honeysuckle), *Passiflora caerulea* (Blue Passion Flower), *Rhododendron liliiflorum* and *Rosa canina* (Dog Rose). Only two



Fig. 2

succulents feature in the range and these are the focus here. Jenkins & McKay (2000) catalogued all these motifs including their dates of introduction and retirement from the range.

Aloe vera

The Portmeirion plate featuring the aloe motif, captioned as '*Aloe Barbados Aloe*', is at Fig. 1. This is highly stylised and the current modern name for this species is *Aloe vera*. *Aloe barbadensis* is an old synonym dating from 1768 when this species was believed to originate from the island of Barbados where it is cultivated, even naturalised, but certainly not native.

This image though is not original and was copied by the Portmeirion designers from an earlier source. As indicated by Jenkins & McKay (2000), seven sources were used from which the plant motifs were copied virtually unaltered. The aloe is copied from Thomas Green's '*The Universal Herbal*', first published in 1816–1820 and reissued, in revised form, as a second edition, in 1824 (Green, 1824). Fig. 2 shows Green's

Aloe vera from
Green (1824)

hand-coloured illustration. However, it seems likely that Green similarly copied this image from an earlier source, since most if not all of the plant images in Green's herbal have been copied from earlier works, usually uncredited. A most likely source is from an 18th century book by John Hill, who was a prolific but notorious author on many subjects, not just botany and horticulture. Many of his botanical books and herbals feature succulents. I have three of these books but this particular aloe engraving is not amongst them. It is possible that *Aloe barbadensis* is included in one of the rare Hill books which I have yet to track down and examine.

Fig. 3 shows the backing to the aloe plate, which appears to be a standard-sized 'bread and butter' plate (Jenkins & McKay, 2000). The aloe motif was introduced in 1972 and retired in 1976.

Fig. 4. shows the very attractive bowl which features seven Botanic Garden motifs with *Passiflora caerulea* as the centre piece, the aloe being amongst six motifs on the bowl's outer surface.

The final general note on the Botanic Garden motifs is that most but not all of the plant images I have examined are accompanied by insects, usually but not exclusively, butterflies and moths. I know nothing about the origins of these insect images and Jenkins & McKay (2000) have nothing to say on this topic.



Fig. 3

Back plate to the Aloe plate

Portmeirion Botanic Garden bowl featuring the Aloe, 28 cm (11 inch) diameter



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Selenicereus grandiflorus

The second and more visually appealing succulent in the Botanic Garden range features a cactus, the motif for which, unlike the aloe, I have been able to trace to the original source.

My *Selenicereus* plate came to me by extreme good fortune. Close friends in the pottery business, knowing of my avid interest in any aspect of cacti and succulents, arranged for a bespoke plate, shown here in Fig. 5, to be produced for me.

Jenkins & McKay (2000) meticulously catalogue all the pottery items in the

Botanic Garden range and only four plate sizes are recorded: 6inch (bread and butter plate), 8inch and 10inch plates and a 13inch steak plate. The cactus motif was only issued in the 8inch and 13inch sizes. My 23.5cm (9¼inch) diameter plate was never part of the original production.

Fig. 6 also shows the second novel feature of my plate: the back plate which indicates that this item is 'Oven to Table, Dishwasher, Microwave & Freezer Safe' Compare this back plate to the original design (Fig. 3). This cactus motif was introduced in 1973 and retired in 1985.

Portmeirion
Botanic Garden
*Cactus
grandiflorus*
plate, 23.5cm
(9¼ inch)
diameter.

Jenkins & McKay (2000) give the origin of this cactus motif as Green (1824) but this is only part of the story. No doubt the Portmeirion designers would have had access to a copy of Green's herbal and would have freely copied images from this. However, as mentioned above, Green himself copied most if not all of his images from earlier 18th century books.

It transpires, therefore, that the Portmeirion cactus motif originates from a very famous 18th century book authored by Philip Miller, who was superintendent at the Chelsea Physic Garden from 1722 till 1770 (Le Rougetel, 1990). Miller's botanical and horticultural publications began in 1724 with the small-scale and small-sized *'The gardeners and florists dictionary, or a complete system of horticulture'*.

This was principally a compilation of extracts from the writings of others, embellished with Miller's current observations. However, in 1731 this work was expanded greatly into the folio work for which Miller became rightly famous: *'The Gardeners Dictionary'*. This ran to eight folio editions till 1768, six smaller abridged editions till 1771, along with translations in three languages and pirated Irish editions (Le Rougetel, 1990).

Miller was later to become the author of many generic names still in use today, including *Cereus*, *Kleinia*, *Opuntia* and *Pereskia*. The most important edition of this huge and weighty tome is the 8th edition of 1768, principally because this is where around 1,300 new species names were first published, many of them being succulent and still in use today, for example *Aloe arborescens*, *Crassula ovata* and *Pereskia aculeata* (Miller, 1768).

The Portmeirion cactus motif almost certainly originates from another Miller publication. His dictionary included only a small number of plates to keep costs within bounds and most of these illustrate garden



Fig. 6

Back plate to the Cactus plate

structures and tools rather than plants. To illustrate his dictionary he published another accompanying book, *'Figures of the most beautiful, useful, and uncommon plants described in the Gardeners dictionary'* with 300 hand-coloured plates, 10 of which beautifully illustrate succulents including two cacti, two gasterias, five mesembs (in two plates), an *Agave*, a *Crassula*, a *Bulbine* and a *Stapelia* (Miller, 1755–1760; Walker, 2018). Based on the available evidence, my conclusion is that this is where the Portmeirion cactus motif originates (Fig. 7).

The engraved Miller plate was based on a painting of a plant flowering at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which was first cultivated and reported on by Miller in 1724. Later Miller (1752) described this cactus thus:

".... [these Sorts are] very tender, and require a very warm Stove to preserve them; these should be placed against the Walls of the Stove, into which they will insinuate their Roots, and extend

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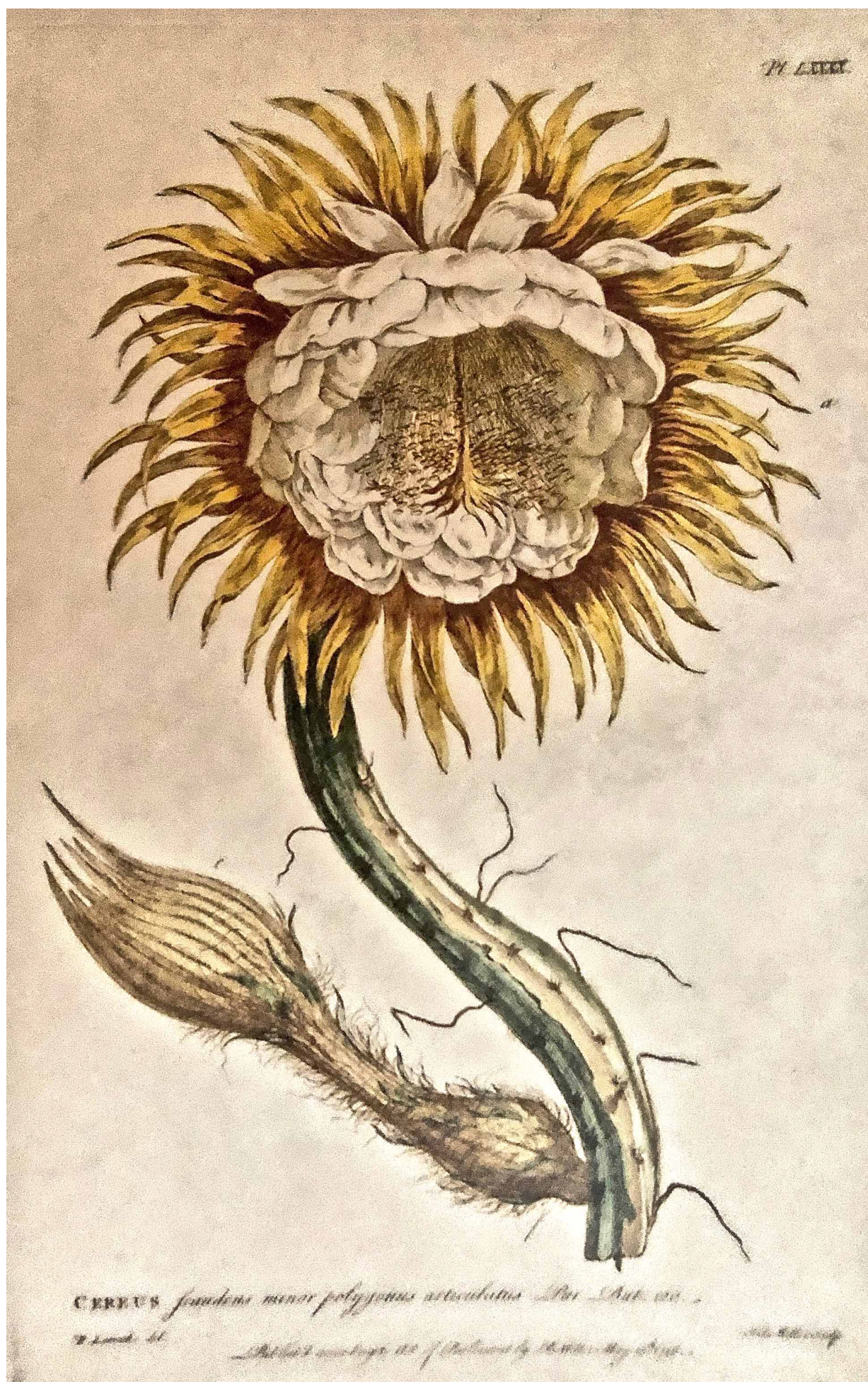


Fig. 7 *Cereus grandiflorus* from Miller (1755–1760)

themselves to a great Length; and with a little Help, in fastening them to the Wall here and there, may be led up about the Ceiling of the House, where they will appear very handsome. And when arrived to a Sufficient Strength, will produce many exceeding large, beautiful sweet-scented Flowers; but they are (like all the Flowers of these Kinds) of very short Duration, scarcely continuing full-blown twelve Hours; nor do the same Flowers ever open again, when once closed; they open in the Afternoon, and, before the next Morning, shut up again. These Flowers are as large as the Flowers of a middle-sized Sun-flower; the outer Order of Rays are of a yellow Colour; the inner are of a pure White; and, in the Centre of the Flower, there are a great Number of long declined Stamina: so that when the Flower is fully expanded, it makes a most noble Appearance; and its Scent is so great as to perfume the whole Air of the Stove: but, before Morning, these Flowers will be quite withered, and hang down: nor could I ever preserve one of these longer, by cutting them from the plant while they were in Beauty. This sort hath not produced any Fruit in Europe."

For Miller (1752, 1755–60) this plant was *Cereus scandens minor polygonus articulatus* or the 'lesser creeping jointed Torch-thistle with many angles'. Linnaeus in 1753 named this *Cactus grandiflorus* but later Miller (1768), sticking to his guns in believing that *Cereus* was distinct from

Cactus (which for Miller was *Melocactus*), renamed this species as *Cereus grandiflorus* (L.) Miller. In 1824 Green reverted to the older Linnaean name. Finally in 1909 this species became *Selenicereus grandiflorus* (L.) Br. & R. as we know it today.

I am a great admirer of Philip Miller for not only was he a well-respected botanist but he was also a highly successful gardener. Much of his work still has relevance today.

In the early decades of the 18th century he was able to grow and flower *S. grandiflorus* along with many other exotic succulents and numerous other tender plants which required greenhouse (or stove) protection. Now, in 21st century Britain, I've tried twice and failed to grow this plant successfully, let alone manage to persuade it to flower!

Photos: Colin C. Walker

Acknowledgements

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